Lessons from the European Police Congress

26 MAY 2025

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The cutting edge of technology is getting even sharper. I was present at Berlin's 28th annual European Police Congress; this blog post summarizes some of the key findings. The event, organized by the Behörden Spiegel, showcased innovative strategies and technology in equal part, through a combination of talks, small panels, and vendor showcases. If Zeitenwende (turning point) was the word of 2022, today's new term, and the factor most likely to revolutionize policework, is artificial intelligence. AI was the dominant presence across a number of panels and corporations, and the race is on. If you ask others, the race may already be over.

Several dedicated open-source intelligence (OSINT) organizations were present, each utilizing a combination of AI techniques with big data collections. Some of these organizations are less than two years old and scaling quickly; others have been around for decades but remain agile and responsive to new market, safety, and political pressures. Several colossal corporations—and even some new players—already run private intelligence networks more sophisticated than dozens of states. Scale up or fall down. One OSINT salesperson showed me a web of social media data from Romania's recent presidential election, scraped from several major platforms and classified by AI and humans into seven categories. The AI can scan each bundle of data to recognize probable disinformation, the tone of a post, its linked network, and much more. The links between foreign and domestic intelligence have never felt less present.

Another OSINT professional shows me an alert feed on a tablet, displaying a live list of reported explosions and other sounds of interest. Just as the modern battlefield is becoming increasingly datafied (through a broadening system of cameras, sensors, signals, and other inputs), so too are domestic populations. Police of the future—indeed, many in the present—can have countless signals interpreted by machines and summarized within seconds. Airstrikes can be reported before the missile hits. Drones can be identified before they are seen with human eyes. Gunshots can be located before a call is made. Weather alerts can be issued with accuracy earlier than ever before. The future of intelligence is now.

It was also clear that there exists a need for modern and secure communications systems which can escape surveillance and also uphold European data privacy laws. The nature of data privacy is evolving rapidly, and professionals in policing, politics, and law are following these developments urgently. The number of companies running secure messaging systems, virtual meetings, and other data-sharing networks has grown competitively large. Cybersecurity is an operational necessity.

Although the means and methods of policework are evolving, elements are rooted in past practices. A twenty-year expert in Afghanistan (now based in Ukraine) presents a slideshow explaining the human element of policing in a complex counterinsurgency. There will always be a need to understand the human terrain of the citizens one serves, and the personal histories that guide operations at the most fundamental level.

A panel discussion on asylum policy explains how a number of political and legal factors are impacting police operations, and highlights how law enforcement is increasingly pulled into a space between military and civilian worlds. Another high-level discussion on youth crime and sentencing follows a similar theme: a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, and the convergence of actors and pressures. The native fluency of younger actors with technology is also unbalancing both policework and criminality.

Another concern among policymakers is the continual blurring between the "underworld" (where criminal activity happens) and the "superior

world" (where legal business is conducted). In short, this concerns the activities and means through which money is laundered into legal businesses, real estate, and corrupt pockets. Infrastructure, ports, and maritime security are occupying a larger role in this field. Some call this new phenomenon "infiltration crime," and its impacts on society are also challenging the fabric of society and government legitimacy.

Although artificial intelligence across its many applications dominated the conference, a number of more traditional technological innovations are still being made. Aside from new firearms, advancements in armour technology can bring thin, slash-proof gloves to police at a reasonable price point (but still are vulnerable to piercing and fire). I equipped a comfortable glove and a man tried to cut my palm to no effect. Then I plunged my hand into a box of broken glass and remain unharmed. The effect of armour on police morale can be incredible.

Several drones were listed for sale (to strictly vetted governments and organizations), including some piloted in an outdoor space. Many of these are already deployed in Ukraine; if new technology isn't being tested in Ukraine, it is not taken very seriously. One saleswoman from Ukraine showed me a video of a vertical takeoff of a medium-sized, fixed-wing surveillance drone and assured me there are hundreds of such drones active across Ukraine at the moment. Other European governments have placed orders for hundreds. When asked whether they would sell these ultra-modern drones to countries like Türkiye, Egypt, or even to private military companies, I heard a mix of responses.

The most innovative technology I could touch was a triple-wheel vehicle that resembled a covered motorcycle. (Two-wheel modifications are available; the design is highly modular and customizable.) This slim, electric-powered tricycle can exceed 110km/hour and navigate through narrow gaps and dense urban traffic. (I imagine it would excel in the narrow streets of Italy.) This vehicle can also be driven easily, without a helmet, and features a number of sensors of its own. Easily replaceable batteries and space for equipment in the back ensure utility for a range of roles and distances. It is designed for a single policeman, though versions are available for paramedics and other emergency workers. They say the prototype can be created at scale for less than €10,000 each, and that it has already passed a series of strict safety checks necessary to deploy it on the urban streets of Europe by the end of 2027. Thousands of pre-orders have already been taken. Before the decade is over, I believe we will see these in most cities of Europe—and many outside Europe.

Near the entrance of the conference stood a virtual policeman, Alex; he's basically a moving digital image projected into a set of hastily spinning fan blades. Behind him, in a large black box, sits a computer (unconnected to the internet), processing his image and providing real-time conversation with him through a nearby podium. The policeman is busy answering an attendee's interrogation on lawful use of force. Though he himself cannot

assume physical form and use force (yet), it strikes me that a unit like this could still find application in a limited number of settings. Still, there are some jobs that a computer can't do, and one salesman assures me that there will always be a strong need for physical bodies. Indeed, most police forces across the continent are seeking new police officers urgently.

Recent technological advances require a police force constantly up-skilling to win the future before their opponents. As the private sector (of which the underworld is part) rapidly adapts to new technologies, the public sector (of which the police are part) continually strive to be first. Fifteen years ago, Berlin police had no qualified drone pilots. Five years ago, they had no AI experts. Today, they are an indispensable part of any large police force. How important will they be tomorrow?

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